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T H E

# P R E F A C E.

**F**IVE annual revolutions of the sun are now performed, since the Critical Review made its first appearance, under such peculiar auspices, that for the greater part of that time it has been exposed to the incessant hostilities of a combination of foes, that can hardly be paralleled in any other period of the annals of literature.

It hath sustained all the complicated assaults of dulness, whose name is Legion; whose progeny spring up like the dragon's teeth which Cadmus sowed; whose heads, like those of the Hydra, are no sooner mowed down, than they regerminate as if were under the scythe, with the most astonishing increase.

Yet dulness, tho' formidable in her own strength, is not the only adversary which hath taken the field against the Critical Review. It hath been obliged to encounter the rage of jealousy, the fury of disappointment, the malevolence of envy, the heat of misapprehension, and the resentment of overweening merit.

Its supposed authors have been vilified in person, and assassinated in reputation. One gentleman, in particular, whose character stands in some degree of favour with the public, has been singled out as a victim, and galled by all the shafts of malignity. He has not only felt the rod of persecution and prosecution for opinions which he really broached, but he has been insulted in public abuse, and traduced in private calumny, by obscure authors whom he did not know, for criticisms he had not written on performances which he never saw. Peace to all such; they are now at rest, and we have no intention to disturb their ashes. Like the insects of a summer's day they have buzzed, and stung, and stunk, and expired; but like other vermin, the eggs they have deposited, may, by some revolving sun of success, be hatched for the propagation of the species. Be that as it will, such puny stings can have no longer any effect upon the Critical Review, improved and strengthened as it is, in age and constitution, schooled by its sufferings, as well as hardened by the opposition which it has undergone, and now fairly surmounted.

The proprietors gladly seize this opportunity of thanking the public, by whose favour they were animated to a perseverance which hath triumphed over all their adversaries: they have distributed the subjects in such a manner among the different writers concerned in the execution of the work, and made such alterations in its œconomy, as they flatter themselves will be found satisfactory and agreeable to the reader of ingenuity and candour. They are determined to support the same spirit of impartiality and freedom, by which it has been hitherto so eminently distinguished, and continue to exert their best endeavours for the regulation of taste and the honour of true criticism.



The following essay, tho' not exactly conformable to the plan of the Critical Review, has nevertheless such an affinity with it, and is executed with such elegance and precision, that we are persuaded the reader will not be sorry to see it prefixed, as an introduction, to the eleventh volume of the work.

*An Enquiry into the Nature of Criticism, with regard to the Progress of Literature.*

THE author of "*the present State of polite Learning in Europe*," (see Critical Review, vol. VII. p. 369) ranks criticism among the causes of the decline of ancient literature. Whether this reflection be founded on truth, may admit of some enquiry. A contempt for criticism is a sure indication of a writer's consciousness of the insufficiency of his own performance to pass the fiery trial, and to bear the test of a nicer eye. That consciousness ought, at first, to have restrained him from "*imagining a device that he was not able to perform*."

"Sumite materiam vestris, qui scribitis, æquam  
Viribus, & versate diu, quid ferre recusent,  
Quid valeant humeri."

True criticism aims at nothing else but the diminishing the number of useless volumes; first, written by conceit, and afterwards purchased by ignorance.

False criticism may, and certainly does, tend to the obstruction of literature.

What is in itself of the best tendency may be perverted; and as there is no virtue which calumny may not misal, or obloquy give a turn to, so there is no beauty in a writer's composition, that may not be misconstrued by malignity, and perverted by ridicule.

A little wit, and a great deal of ill-nature, will furnish the satyrists, but not the critic. True criticism, when under the direction of taste, tempered with candor, supported with spirit, and pursued with impartiality, must, on all hands, be allowed to encourage and promote, rather than tend to the decline of literature.

Taste is certainly an indispensable qualification in a critic, to relish the beauties of an author, to discover and point out those which are latent, and lie concealed from the eyes of a superficial reader; to detect the errors of a writer, and display in their just and proper colours the merits and faults of each literary production.

Taste, however, is insufficient of itself, to form the character of the critic,

The quickness of his perceptions, his acute, delicate sensations, must be tempered with that one thing needful,

Candor.

*Candor.* Whilst his sagacity and discernment enables him to discover, so his *charity* must prompt him to hide, cover, and conceal little slips and inadvertencies, *non paucis offender maculis*; he must not be *too rigid to mark what is done amiss*, nor check the laudable spirit of emulation aspiring to literary fame; favourable allowances must be made, and some regard to the *intention*, influence his judgment as to the merits of the *execution*. Even the errors of genius must demand his indulgence, and modesty, though defective in the *acumen ingenii*, claim his tender regard:—he must *smile friendly*, and *reprove with loving correction*.

Taste and candor, however necessary ingredients, are yet insufficient to compose the critic, unless they be accompanied with

*Spirit.* Truth is but one thing, and can no more be overthrown, than ignorance can be established; however pompously the one may be ushered into the world, however humbly the other; error must not be connived at, because it is dignified by titles, nor the blemishes of a literary production, palliated and extenuated to the prejudice of veracity.

“ Out with it, Dunciad, let the secret pass,

The secret to each fool, that he’s an ass.”

The true critic must speak as he feels, be the truth ever so disagreeable. Writers of great talents, who employ their parts in propagating immorality, and seasoning vicious sentiments with wit and humour, are to be looked upon as the pests of society, and enemies of mankind. Against the ill impressions which may be apprehended from wit, unless tempered with delicacy, from performances bordering on obscenity and profaneness, tending to promote dissolute and licentious principles, he must look upon it as his duty to warn the reader;—*Latet anguis in herba*:

When truth or virtue an affront endures,

Th’ affront is mine, my friend, and should be yours.

The true critic will look upon it as incumbent upon him to rise up, and resent the indignity. *Taste, candor, and spirit*, tho’ they are all essentially necessary to, yet will they not *perfect* the critic. To complete his character, we must add (without which all his other qualifications are insufficient to procure esteem)

*Impartiality.* Personal reflections, and invidious distinctions, must have no place in the true critic. He must strive to forget the *man*, whilst he is animadverting on the writer. As the public is his patron, so to obtain the favour of the public must be his sole aim; and in order to this, he must divest himself equally from the bias of friendship, or the prejudice of party. Truth alone must be the invariable object of his pursuits in every point of view; unawed by fear, uninfluenced by envy, and unmoved by passion.



Certainly the cause of literature may essentially suffer from criticism, if not under these restrictions.

As there is not, perhaps, in the whole circle of literary employment, a more arduous task than that of a judicious critic, it is no wonder if we have seen this character assumed by those who were unequal to it, and that, which *ought* to be, and, in *right hands* certainly is, the *test and criterion*, become the *bane and destruction* of literature. When the abuse of title pages is come to such a pass, that *fronti nulla fides* (and we may not unjustly apply the words of the Roman poet to the literary productions of this age *sunt bona, sunt quædam mediocria, sunt mala plura.*) certainly it is highly expedient, that a set of men of approved parts and talents, should undertake the charitable employment of reading for the public; and thus exert the abilities with which nature hath endowed them, in the service of their country, and in the cause of literature.

To expatiate on the *utility* of such a task, would be equally vain and superfluous. Undoubtedly the art of criticism never rose to such a degree of perfection as *now*, and no wonder under *such* hands, and executed by *masters*.

To pass any encomium on the *manner* in which they have performed their parts, would be needless and unnecessary, as it is conspicuous to all competent judges: that is self-evident; and whatever I could say, would at best be but a faint echo of the public voice.

Sufficient proof is given, that they did not attempt so difficult an undertaking, without having maturely considered their own abilities previous to the execution.

Envy and malignity are the sure concomitants of merit and success.

“Fervens difficili bile tumet jecur,

Et in celeres Jambos misit Furem.”

These will be so far from intimidating the *true critic*, that he will triumph in them as the best testimony of *real desert*.

He will set at defiance the impotent efforts of stupidity and dulness to *blast* his attempts, and asperse his laudable endeavours.

Persecution, he is conscious, *must* be the fate of all reformers; — (For what is less grateful than reproof?)

But entirely depending on the favour of the public (which is the only patron he will ever solicit, being *personally* no man's enemy, no man's dependant, the votary of no sect, the tool of no faction) he despises the threats of little minds, spirited with revenge;

“Est mihi tanti.

Ready to exclaim with the great Roman orator,

“Hoc animo semper fui, ut invidiam, *virtute* partam, *gloriam non invidiam* puterem.”

THE